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Development of a model for early childhood teacher and caregiver preparation and development to enhance desired qualities of young children in Thailand

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Abstract

This qualitative paper aimed to develop a model for early childhood teacher and caregiver [ECTC] preparation and development to enhance the desired qualities of young children. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 60 (30 participants in each interview) including early childhood care and education [ECCE] experts, school administrators at ECCE level, early childhood teachers from both public and private sectors, caregivers, undergraduate students majoring in ECCE, and parents, followed by a focus group interview of 30 purposively selected participants and a public hearing with 35 participants. A four-step content analysis was conducted: (1) familiarizing the data; (2) splitting the text into meaning units and then condensing these meaning units; (3) developing codes; and (4) forming categories and themes (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Results suggested three components of the model: quantitative and qualitative goals, mechanism and relevant agencies, and early childhood education and care [ECCE] program. The quantitative goal was the consistency between the number of graduates and future needs for ECTC, while the qualitative goal was the competencies of ECTC. Mechanisms conducted by the relevant agencies were different according to their roles. Three ECCE programs were established. The findings help improve understanding of early childhood teacher education, particularly in a developing country, and solve the current problems in caregiver and teacher preparation and development.

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Introduction

The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand in 2017 emphasizes quality education, care and development of young children. The state, therefore, gives priority to early childhood development since birth. Research indicates that the first 1,000 days of life is a time that matters to the brain (Office of the Education Council [ONEC], 2020).

Early childhood teachers are therefore an essential driver to early childhood care and education [ECCE]. At present, the preparation system of early childhood teachers still encounters many problems, such as the number of early childhood teachers prepared exceeding the quota, teacher quality (e.g. teachers did not meet the graduation qualifications), lack of a mechanism to monitor and evaluate quality from the teacher preparation system and teachers' necessary skills and competency development (Rukspollmuang et al., 2017), limited essential knowledge and understanding of early childhood education regarding age-appropriate developmental enhancement according to Ministry of Education (MOE, 2018). As a result, the Thai teacher preparation system is not as efficient as it should be.

In the past, teacher education was only the obligation of the state. However, after the enforcement of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand in 1997, private educational institutions that offer bachelor's degrees have a right to provide teacher education. Regarding the education reform under the enforcement of the National Education Act 1999, the state had to re-establish a system for preparing teachers and educational personnel; Article 52 caused teacher education institutions to modify the new working system (Akaraborn, 2001, as cited in Siribanpitak et al., 2018) to provide the mission of preparing early childhood teachers.

Literature Review

Desired Qualities of Young Children

Based on the Early Childhood Development Act 2019, National Education Standards in 2018, Early Childhood Education Curriculum in 2017, and Chaemchoy et al. (2022), desired qualities of young children can be summarized as: (1) creating careers and good life quality; (2) co-creating innovation to develop a stable, prosperous, and sustainable society; (3) having Thai and global strong citizenship for peace; (4) having good development physically, mentally, in discipline, emotionally, socially, and intellectually appropriate to their age; having basic skills to learn continuously throughout life; being able to learn following the principles of individual potential development and special needs; (5) having good character, morality, discipline, and being able to absorb aesthetics and culture diversity; and (6) respecting other people's values, having a spirit of living together in society with equality and consciousness of being a Thai and global citizen. To achieve these learning outcomes, desired learning outcomes of early childhood teachers and caregivers [ECTC] were reviewed.

Desired Learning Outcomes of ECTC

To meet the desired learning outcomes of young children mentioned above, ECTC is required to have essential skills. The essential skills of ECTC in literature, including Skills framework for early childhood care and education suggested by SkillsFuture (2021), California early childhood educator competencies set by (California Department of Education [CDE], 2011), and professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators suggested by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020), can be synthesized into eight competencies: (1) child development theory; (2) curriculum and pedagogy; (3) learning environment; (4) interaction and relationship; (5) health, safety, and nutrition; (6) collaborating with families and the community; (7) building professional capacity; and (8) building organizational capacity.

ECCE Programs

ECCE programs in four different countries, namely Finland, Sweden, Italy, and Singapore, were reviewed and can be summarized into three themes. Firstly, the curriculum design starts from a framework for teachers' competencies. The duration of the program varies from three to four years for a bachelor's degree. There are some programs for caregivers of two years duration with fewer regulations. The practicum starts from the first year. Secondly, the instruction focuses on developing basic skills of young children, including languages, health, and sanitation. Some instructional methods are emphasized, such as simulation. Thirdly, evaluation can be conducted in written and/or oral examinations. Additional assignments are also included.

Early Childhood Education Programs in Thailand

Early childhood education programs in Thailand cover the following contents: (1) philosophy, theory, and principles of early childhood education; (2) early childhood psychology, developmental psychology, and early childhood learning psychology; (3) curriculum development and learning management science for young child development; (4) development for young children; (5) organizing learning experiences for physical, emotional, and social development and organizing a learning ecosystem that is conducive to early childhood learning; (6) nutrition and nutrition preparation for children; (7) educational management for specific target groups of children and special education for young children; (8) technology and measurement and evaluation for young children and digital technology in early childhood education management; (9) research and innovation for early childhood development; (10) collaboration with family, community, and society in early childhood development; and (11) administration, supervision, and quality assurance of early childhood education (Office of the Basic Education Commission [OBEC], 2018).

Three main research questions guide this study: What are desired learning outcomes of ECTC that respond to the desired learning outcomes of young children? What are the current state and problems of ECTC preparation and development? What is a model for ECTC preparation and development?

Methodology

Participants

A qualitative approach was adopted. Purposive samples of 90 in total were selected to answer the three research questions. Of 90 participants, 30 participants took part in answering each research question. The participants included early childhood education experts, school administrators at early childhood education level, early childhood teachers from both public and private sectors, caregivers, undergraduate students majoring in early childhood education, and parents of young children. In addition, 35 participants in the ECCE setting were invited to join a public hearing.

Data Collection

Before data collection, the researcher obtained research ethical approval issued by a large university's Institutional Review Board [IRB]. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore desired learning outcomes of ECTC. A sample question of the first interview was, "Based on the desired learning outcomes of young children shown, what abilities do you think early childhood teachers and caregivers should have to respond to these learning outcomes?" After the first interview was done, the second interview was carried out to explore current state and problems on ECTC preparation and development. A sample question of the second interview was "Kindly describe the current state and problems of early childhood teacher and caregiver preparation and development that you observe or face."

After the research questions from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed, the researcher constructed a draft model for ECTC preparation and development. A focus group discussion was used to collect comments and recommendations on the drafted model. Focus group questions focused on three aspects: goals, mechanism and relevant agencies, and early childhood education programs. Then, the researcher adjusted the model according to the comments and recommendations and developed a second draft of the model. The second draft of the model was brought to the public hearing for additional comments and recommendations.

The individual interviews were conducted through both offline and online protocols using ZOOM application according to convenience of the interviewees, and the focus group interview and the public hearing were conducted at a large public institution. All the interviews were recorded with consent from the participants. The records were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was used for data analysis. Data were coded to identify themes; coding was also developed based on existing literature. The coding grid determined the strength and frequency of each theme. Special attention was paid to the similar keywords in each transcript. Thus, the decision for inclusion in each theme was made.

Results

Desired Learning Outcomes of ECTC

Results from the semi-structured interview suggest one additional skill: cross-cultural skills derived from the area-based concept. Cross-cultural skills emerged because the preparation and development of ECTC were different from one area to another regarding desired qualities of young children in each area. Thus, the desired learning outcomes of ECTC consisted of nine competencies: (1) child development theory; (2) health, safety, and nutrition; (3) interaction and relationship; (4) collaborating with family and community; (5) learning environment; (6) pedagogy; (7) cross-cultural skills; (8) building professional capacity; and (9) building organizational capacity.

Current State and Problems on ECTC Preparation

Based on data from the interviews, current state and problems on ECTC can be summarized into three themes: (1) goals of ECTC preparation; (2) mechanism and relevant agencies of ECTC preparation; and (3) ECCE programs. Goals meant inconsistency between the graduation rate and actual needs and low quality of ECTC. Mechanism and relevant agencies involved inconsistency between imposed policies and actual problems from policy-level agencies, inadequate lessons taught by teacher education institutions, no specific teaching licenses for early childhood teachers offered by professional organizations. ECCE programs had a lack of considering mental health factors in the recruitment and selection of the teacher candidates and teaching did not link to real world problems.

Current State and Problems on ECTC Development

Data from the interviews can be summarized into three themes: (1) goals of the ECTC development; (2) mechanism and relevant agencies of the ECTC development; and (3) ECTC development programs. Regarding the goals, continuous professional development, inadequate financing, and inconsistency between developed knowledge and the actual needs of the schools (area-based development). Mechanism and relevant agencies involved same development contents that did not match the right development direction of early childhood teachers, traditional teaching methods, and lack of coordination with higher education institutions [HEIs]. The ECTC development programs used a representative mechanism that made many instructors miss opportunities for advancement, were short-term with unclear goals, used one-time assessments, and did not encourage participation of private sector.

Model for ECTC Preparation and Development

The model for ECTC preparation and development consisted of three components, including: (1) goals; (2) mechanism and relevant agencies; and (3) early childhood education programs, as follows.

Goals

Goals were categorized into quantitative and qualitative goals. Quantitative goal is the number of new graduates in early childhood education being consistent with the future needs of the ECTC. Qualitative goal is the nine competencies as desired learning outcome of ECTC mentioned above, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 ECTC's competencies

Competencies	Description
(1) Child development theory	Integrate and apply knowledge of how an individual child develops and learns from birth through age six across physical, social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive domains and support for the individual development and learning of all children
(2) Health, safety, and nutrition	Advocate and adhere to health, safety, nutritional, and hygiene standards and procedures and take appropriate actions to protect all young children
(3) Interaction and relationship	Understand that all behaviors have meaning and foster a respectful relationship with the young children
(4) Collaborating with family and community	- Form and maintain good relationships with families and other community members and value the diversity of families
(5) Learning environment	- Understand "Universal Design" referring to materials, adaptive technology, and low and high technology. - Describe elements of developmentally appropriate indoor and outdoor learning environments and have a basic understanding of the rationale for the selection and arrangement of materials and equipment in the ECCE and engage them in exploration and enthusiasm for their ideas

Table 1 Continued

Competencies	Description
(6) Pedagogy	- Customize, integrate, and design developmentally appropriate teaching and learning, as well as caregiving approaches within an evidence-based curriculum framework, - Value a play in the learning experiences, and design and support meaningful and culturally responsive learning experiences for all children. - Conduct positive classroom management
(7) Cross-cultural skills	Understand local wisdom and culture and act with them appropriately
(8) Building professional capacity	Emphasize the value of lifelong learning and taking responsibility for one's professional growth and development and practice ethical behaviors and professionalism
(9) Building organizational capacity	- Improve skills and align processes and frameworks through teamwork and collaboration within ECCE centers to achieve the center's goals and vision; - Contribute to and foster a culture of collaboration and positive workplace relations; - Engage in the center initiatives and programs; - Use various collaborative strategies, including teaming models and appropriate use of technology when working with others; - Uphold and participate with other team members in articulating and developing a shared vision for an improved system that ensures the success of all young children and families.

Mechanism and relevant agencies

1. Policy-level agencies: Mechanisms for the MOE, The Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation [MHESRI], and other related agencies were as follows: (1) create a central digital database of ECTC regarding the needs for teachers in the area (area-based), both quantitatively and qualitatively, in all affiliations; (2) design a mixed system for early childhood teacher preparation—70 percent as the close system and 30 percent as the open system, or 70:30 (70% for preparing teacher students according to quota and 30% for preparing teacher students freely); and (3) establish a pre-school teacher excellence center [PTEC] characterized by higher education institutions specializing in preparing and developing ECTC in the regions.

2. Professional Organizations [PO]: Mechanisms adopted by PO included: (1) issuing licenses of early childhood teachers; (2) setting a code of professional ethics; and (3) renewal of the early childhood teacher licenses must be assessed and developed by PTEC.

3. The Ministry of Health [MOH]: MOH developed parenting courses that focus on health care and behaviors during pregnancy, stimulation of infant development, and infant care after birth. Qualifications were not specified but target learners included parents, interested persons, public health news reporters, and public health volunteers of the villages. Competencies consisted of health care and behaviors during pregnancy, stimulation of infant development, and infant care after birth.

4. HEIs: HEIs designed four-year bachelor's degree programs characterized as curriculum in context, active learning, hands-on learning, and school integrated learning. Qualifications included graduating grade 12 or holding Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education. Competencies consisted of child development theory; health, safety, and nutrition; interaction and relationship; collaborating with family and community; learning environment; pedagogy; cross-cultural skill; building professional capacity; building organizational capacity. HEIs also designed two-year associate degree programs characterized as competency-based curriculum. Qualifications included graduates of grade 12 or a diploma in ECCE. Competencies consisted of child development theory; health, safety, and nutrition; interaction and relationship; collaborating with family and community; learning environment; pedagogy; and cross-cultural skill.

5. HEIs, community colleges, or related agencies: They developed one-year diploma programs characterized as competency-based curriculum. Qualifications included parents or interested persons who have passed the parenting course, graduates of grade 12, and caregivers currently in a nursery or day-care center. Competencies consisted of child development theory; health, safety, nutrition, interaction, and relationship; and collaboration with family and community.

6. PTEC: PTEC developed ECTC in a five-year cycle, including 30 percent of professional skills, 50 percent of increasing the potential of managing learning experiences for young children, and 20 percent of development following ECTC's interest. Scope of development included reskills, upskills, and new skills. Qualifications included early childhood teachers and caregivers.

The model for ECTC preparation and development is summarized as shown in Figure 1.

Discussion

This study results highlight one emerging theme of the desired learning outcomes of ECTC—cross-cultural skills. In Thailand, as school contexts are different, teachers and caregivers need to equip mentioned skills. The findings also offer a new model for ECTC preparation and development developed from the current state and problems. The inconsistency reflected in the quantitative goal is because most graduates in early childhood education choose to work in other fields, and some educational institutions offer a low salary.

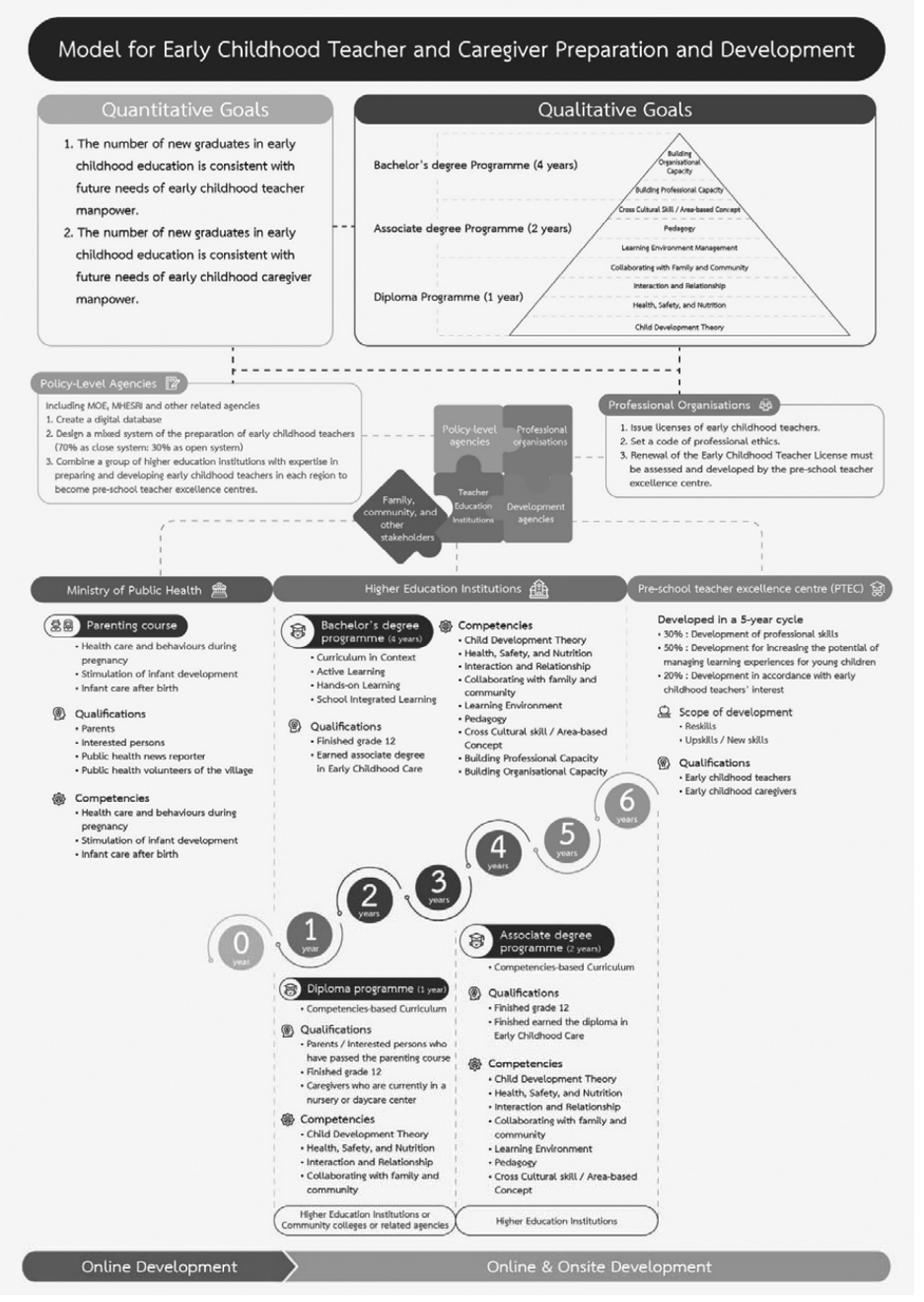


Figure 1 A model for ECTC preparation and development

The results of both quantitative and qualitative goals of the models align with a study by Siribanpitak et al. (2018). They found that the preparation of high-performing teachers should be prepared according to the number needed by the educational institutions in both the public and private sectors (closed system).

As the model seems to adjust much of the existing model, the practitioners may worry about changes, especially regarding the closed and open systems (the mixed system). Some of the HEIs, as the early childhood preparation organizations, will be concerned about the decrease in enrolment for early childhood education, especially private institutions. Those organizations that have low prestige in the field will hardly recruit teacher students in comparison to others. However, Siribanpitak et al. (2018) found that the mixed system and the closed system were highly desirable among the practitioners. That can be explained by a large sample selected by the study, while the present study selected a small sample and mainly focused on qualitative results. The study by Siribanpitak et al. (2018) suggested a mixed system of 50 percent as a closed system and 50 percent as an open system, while the current study suggests 70 percent and 30 percent of a closed system and open system, respectively.

The model suggested the establishment of PTEC. This is in line with Phethchuai et al. (2017) claiming that appointing good early childhood teachers needs monitoring progress in teaching profession after graduation. It is also consistent with Suwannathen and Chalakbang (2016) suggesting two causal factors of quality early childhood education: academic leadership and organizational competency.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study provides a valuable contribution to early childhood teacher education. Policy-level agencies for teacher preparation and development should use information from the central digital database for policymaking, including the quantitative and qualitative goals of teacher preparation and development. The agencies should design a curriculum to enable student teachers to develop early childhood children to achieve the six qualities suggested by this study.

Teachers and caregivers can use these study results regarding desired learning outcome of ECTC to keep continuous professional development. Parents can benefit from this study in terms of parent courses offered when policy makers implement the model yielded from this study. Policy makers can utilize results of this study to enable teacher education organizations to be effective in responding to current states and problems of teacher preparation and development explored by the current study.

Further research should also focus on a study of systems and mechanisms for preparing and developing teachers that link the central digital database to implementation to reduce teacher preparation that does not meet the quantity and quality required by the educational institutions. Guidelines for learning design for student teachers should be studied using a competency-based curriculum. Strategies for preparing and developing ECTC should be studied according to quantitative and qualitative goals. Finally, there should be a study of the systems and mechanisms that drive agencies' operations involved in the preparation and development of ECTC.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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